

QUEER MOUNTAIN WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

1. THE STUDY AREA - 81,550 acres

The Queer Mountain Wilderness Study Area (WSA) (NV-060-354) is located in Esmeralda County, Nevada along the California-Nevada border about twenty miles northwest of Beatty, Nevada. This 81,550 acre WSA is contiguous to the California Desert Conservation Area (CDCA) WSA, Little Sand Springs, and Death Valley National Monument WSA No. 1.

The south boundary of the Queer Mountain WSA roughly parallels State Highway 72. The eastern boundary is formed by Gold Mountain and the Willow Springs roads. The north boundary is formed by Oriental Wash and mining spur roads. The west boundary is the California border. The roughly rectangular Queer Mountain WSA contains an upland of east or northeast trending ridges and valleys surrounded on all sides, except the west, by broad bajadas. No springs or streams occur in the WSA.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE - 42,650 acres recommended for wilderness 38,900 acres recommended for nonwilderness

The recommendation for this WSA is to designate 42,650 acres as wilderness and release 38,900 acres for uses other than wilderness.

The recommendation differs from the proposed action contained in the Final Esmeralda-Southern Nye Wilderness EIS. Additional study of the area, focused in particular on the relationship of the WSA to a California Desert Conservation Area (CDCA) BLM WSA and Death Valley National Monument wilderness study area, led to the conclusion that a portion of the WSA should be recommended for wilderness. The portion now recommended was analyzed as a partial wilderness alternative in the EIS. The partial alternative was drawn to avoid the areas of potential mineral resources.

The area represents an ecotone between the hot desert to the south and the cold desert to the north. The resulting area is one of extremes of environment and beauty. The WSA contains an upland of mountain ridges culminating on Gold Mountain. These uplands are typically covered with a sparse scattering of pinyon and juniper trees. Interspersed among the pinyon and juniper trees are big sage, bitterbrush, and cliff rose. The north slopes of the ridge are covered in a dense forest of Joshua trees, cacti and other plants generally associated with the hot desert regions. The area south of the ridge is a mixture of hot and cold desert plants growing on the same sites.

The WSA is predominantly rolling hills and flat benches slowly receding to the west and Death Valley. Although topography is unspectacular, small volcanic outcrops, unusual erosion areas, flash flood washes, and other numerous geologic features provide a mix of interesting visual displays. Along the California border, the flat benches begin to break up into colorful mosaics of volcanic rock.

The WSA presents a harsh environment to the visitor. Temperatures can range from 120 degrees during the summer to -20 degrees in the winter. This is coupled with an annual precipitation rate of less than 4 inches and the total absence of any springs or streams to present an atmosphere to true wilderness.

The harsh environment will limit recreation possibilities to only the more resourceful visitor. There exists excellent opportunity for nature study and observance of wildlife. Mule deer, wild horses, desert bighorn sheep, and a variety of small mammals and reptiles inhabit the variety of habitats provided in the ecotone.

Mining in the adjacent Hornsilver mining district continues at present. Exploration of several existing claims

for metallic minerals is projected within the Gold Mountain area.

Manageability of the WSA would require extensive patrolling to minimize off-road travel.

The Queer Mountain WSA is contiguous to the CDCA's Little Sand Springs WSA and Death Valley National Monument WSA No. 1. Both of these area have been recommended for designation as wilderness. The Grapevine WSA is located directly to the south of the Queer Mountain WSA.

3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS

A. Naturalness: Most of the Queer Mountain WSA is in pristine condition. The harsh environmental conditions have served to ward off the casual intrusions of man. Although several short ways extend into the WSA, the ways have become virtually unusable. The central core and western boundary of the WSA are difficult to access and seldom used. Despite the areas flat appearance, the ground is covered with areas of sharp volcanic rock interspersed with soft sand filled washes. Queer Mountain WSA contains an upland of east or northeast trending ridges and valleys surrounded on all sides, except the west, by broad bajadas. Elevations range from 4,000 feet near Grapevine Canyon to 7,952 foot Gold Mountain. This 4,000 feet elevation change occurs gradually over the 14 mile length of the WSA.

The WSA is located in a transitional vegetative zone. Most of the WSA is vegetated with shrubs and cactus of the saltbush/greasewood plant community, but patches of creosote bush and Joshua trees, more typical of the Las Vegas area, also occur. The lack of perennial waters along the boundary of the WSA and the absence of any springs or streams within the WSA has limited the access of livestock.

Naturalness is impaired on the southern bajada that slopes down to State Highway 72 and the north slope and bajada of Gold Mountain. The highway is easily visible from the southern reaches and presents an undesirable intrusion. Four ways totaling three miles in length enter the WSA along the southern boundary. Extensive mining activity has occurred on the north slope of Gold Mountain mainly outside the WSA boundary. Five ways totaling about five miles in length enter the WSA from the north and connect outside roads to a cluster of minor diggings on the north side. These intrusions substantially impair naturalness in the immediate area. The rugged canyons and rapid elevation gain in this portion of the WSA screen the visitor and provide a feeling of distance.

B. Solitude: The Queer Mountain WSA provides an outstanding opportunity for solitude. Topographic screening is outstanding in most of the mountainous portion of the WSA because of the numerous ridges, canyons, peaks and other features. Although the area has only a marginal cover of pinyon pine and juniper, the localized draws and canyons combine with the vegetative cover to provide effective screening. The large valleys, particularly on the south end, are too broad, straight, and uniform in slope to offer outstanding screening. The bajadas on the north and south sides provide minimal topographic and vegetative screening.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation: The Queer Mountain WSA offer excellent opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation. The lack of perennial waters anywhere within the WSA will require that those who visit the WSA to be more self reliant, cognizant of desert ecology, and resourceful. The vegetative diversity provides and excellent forum for nature study and observation of small mammals, reptiles, and song birds.

D. Special Features: The primary special feature is the uniqueness of vegetation and the natural condition of the area.

4. MANAGEABILITY

The Queer Mountain WSA is considered to be manageable over the long-term. The Queer Mountain WSA has two types of management problems: mining claims and potential for indiscriminate vehicle use. Any mineral development would affect the wilderness values of the WSA from the main ridge north including Gold Mountain.

The Queer Mountain WSA boundary includes about 4,000 acres of sloping bajada adjacent to Oriental Wash. This easily traveled terrain is already crossed by five ways that go to old prospecting sites. Closing these ways and preventing further vehicle use on these bajadas would require an extensive patrolling effort.

The development of mining activity along the northern boundary of the WSA could result in activities requiring additional management to minimize loss of wilderness qualities.

5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES

The Queer Mountain WSA contains 1,560 acres of mining claims, of which 420 acres are pre-FLPMA. Within the WSA are 33,910 acres with a moderate favorability for metallic mineral resources. Exploration of several existing claims for metallic minerals is projected within the Gold Mountain area. It is projected that an eventual discovery would initiate the development of a small open pit gold mine. A total of 11.2 acres would be physically disturbed from mineral exploration and development activity.

Leasable mineral potential is low for oil and gas and moderate for geothermal resources. There are no oil and gas or geothermal leases. The bajadas have a moderate potential for non-metallics.

6. SUMMARY OF WSA-SPECIFIC PUBLIC COMMENTS

Eight comments were received during the initial inventory in 1979. Six agreed with further study of the area and two disagreed.

During the intensive inventory of 1980, ten specific comments on the WSA and 2,327 comments were received stating the WSA met wilderness criteria.

During the issue identification stage for the RMP, four specific comments opposed to wilderness designation of this WSA were received from local residents. All stated the area had mineral value. The owners of the Silver Mountain claims, adjacent to the WSA, were two of those commenting at this and every stage of the wilderness study. Three comments were received opposing any wilderness in Esmeralda County.

Public hearings were held in Pahrump, Goldfield and Las Vegas, Nevada. During the public hearing and comment period, a total of 48 comments were received, eight supported no wilderness and 40 were in favor of wilderness.

No local government commented on this WSA. The State, through its consistency review, concurred with the Preferred Alternative of no wilderness.

The National Park Service recommended the WSA be recommended for wilderness to provide a natural extension of its proposed wilderness area. The Environmental Protection Agency stated that the criteria used on the selection of the Preferred Alternative was unclear.